



## Real by McDiggin'It

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jonathan B., Nancy W.

**Pairings:** Jonathan B./Nancy W.

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-11-16 21:07:51

**Updated:** 2017-11-16 21:07:51

**Packaged:** 2019-12-17 04:54:34

**Rating:** K

**Chapters:** 1

**Words:** 3,589

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

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# Real

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Nancy Wheeler is by far, the most popular girl in school. She has a reputation for being the former girlfriend of Hawkins High's former King, Steve. Steve was her first and only boyfriend, and she liked—likes him. He was charming and funny, which initially fueled the fire she had felt when she first started dating him. But as time went on, their relationship began to fall apart. Of course, they kept up appearances for the sake of their respective reputations, but their love, or the lack of it, had made it clear to the both of them that they were not right for each other.

Steve was all about parties and having fun, which is fine with Nancy... but she likes her alone time as well. She likes having time to sit down and read a book in silence without interruptions. She likes being able to study in peace without her boyfriend trying to get her to strip naked while she's at it. She likes hanging out with Barb without being pressured into doing things they both don't really feel like doing.

She's rebellious at times... but sometimes, she's just Nancy Wheeler, the girl no one *really* knew.

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She wanted to get into a good University, so she worked hard to maintain her 4.0 gpa, and volunteered for as many extracurricular activities as she could handle. The most recent event?

Hawkins Middle School Snow Ball.

The preparations for the Ball were easy enough. Now for the hard

part, actually being there, pouring punch for middle schoolers and pretending like she actually wants to be there. It's not like she hates the students or anything, but... the Snow Ball isn't exactly the most appealing thing in the world right then.

She decides not to focus too much on the utter boringness of the Ball, and instead, focuses on watching the people in the gym. She starts on the far right, scrutinizing the teachers. Pretty much the same teachers she had when she was in middle school. Her eyes roam over the crowded dance floor, where she sees her brother and his friends talking animatedly about something, and then her eyes stop over someone standing by the photo booth. The only other person there who isn't a teacher or a middle schooler.

She immediately recognizes him. Jonathan Byers. The quiet boy who was in the same school and grade as her since they were in Kindergarten. He always kept to himself, hardly ever says anything at all, and never ever gets in trouble for anything. A lot of the people in their classes always said that he was a freak and a pervert, but there have been absolutely no evidence that he's any of those things.

She watches him, talking to a few kids in front of a wallpaper, gesturing with his hands and pointing several times before he takes their picture and waits for the next couple of people to take their pictures.

She wonders, why he's there. Most of the high schoolers are out hanging out with their friends... but then again, Jonathan Byers doesn't really have friends. He always went solo, or with his little brother... one of Mike's best friends.

She looks away quickly when Jonathan suddenly turns and looks in her direction, and that's when she sees Dustin sitting on the bleachers by himself. She looks around, noticing that Mike and his other friends all had dance partners, but not Dustin. Her heart aches for the adorable little boy. He'd always been her favorite out of all Mike's friends. He was definitely the funniest.

She smiles to herself as she steps away from the punch bowl and crosses the auditorium to go to him. She asks him to dance with her, drawing the attention of the eighth grade girls to them before she lets

him ask one of the girls to dance again. The reaction he gets the second time around is much warmer than he'd thought, and Nancy smiles proudly as she watches him whisk the girl off for a dance.

She walks back towards the punch bowl, smiling to herself as she turns in her place and looks in the direction of the photo booth once more. She frowns when she finds the spot empty, save for a few props and a fake snowflake covered wallpaper.

"That was really cool of you." A voice says from behind her, momentarily startling her. She whirls around and finds herself staring at none other than Jonathan Byers.

"What?" She asks, confused about his comment.

He smiles and nods towards the dance floor. "What you did for Dustin. It was really nice of you to dance with him."

"Oh." She looks towards the dance floor and smiles. She tucks a few strands of her loose hair behind her ear and looks at Jonathan again. "Yeah. He's actually a pretty great kid."

Jonathan nods. "I know. One of the funniest in their little group."

Nancy chuckles. "Yeah."

They stand in silence for a few moments, watching the middle schoolers continue to sway with the music.

Nancy then looks at Jonathan and gives him a questioning look.

Jonathan notices and quirks an eyebrow at her. "What?"

She shrugs, "Just wondering why you're volunteering in a middle school event."

Jonathan chuckles at that. "I could ask you the same thing."

She grins and shakes her head, "Isn't it obvious? I live for these middle school events." She jokes, making the boy laugh. She realizes quickly that she had never heard him laugh. Or smile. Or speak more than 4 words. It makes her feel good to know that she was the cause

for it. "Extracurricular activities look good on transcripts." She tells him.

Jonathan furrows his eyebrows at that. "What?"

She laughs a little. "The reason I'm here."

"Oh." He nods and looks out at the dance floor again. "Right... I guess we're here for the same reason then."

Nancy finds herself staring at him, her mind wandering to what he does for fun, what he enjoys, what his hobbies are, and what he's like when he's at home and away from prying eyes. Other than the fact that he's never without his fancy looking camera, she knows next to nothing about him. And she wants to know. "What do you like to do for fun?" She blurts out, then quickly shuts her mouth and looks away from him as a blush creeps up her neck.

Jonathan stares at her for a long moment before he grins at the pink tinge on her cheeks. "Photography." He replies.

Nancy looks up at him through her lashes. "Right."

He smiles. "I've been into photography since I was six years old and figured out how my mom's Polaroid camera works."

Nancy smiles as she conjures up an image of a small, six year old brown haired and eyed boy, walking around outdoors, taking Polaroid shots of random sceneries. It's almost poetic. Like the way he prefers to go solo. The way he's so quiet, but looks so intensely at the world around him as if he were screaming his thoughts to the world. "So you're a photographer." She finally says quietly.

Jonathan shrugs, "I don't know about that, but that's what I aspire to be when I get out of here."

She stares at him as a conversation she had with Steve comes back to her.

*"Would it be so bad if I stayed here? I could work for my dad."*

"Do you think it's bad to live here for a while?" She asks Jonathan

curiously.

Jonathan looks at her and chuckles. "Hawkins will always be my home, and perhaps when I'm much older, I'll retire and come back to live out the rest of my days here... but we're still young right now, and it would be a waste to stay here and live like there's nothing out there in the world to see."

Nancy finds herself falling into this abyss of thoughts and revelations. This boy, Jonathan Byers, was basically saying what she's been saying all along. She loves Hawkins and all the friends and memories she made here, but she wants to go out into the world and discover what's out there. She wants to go on adventures that will some day turn into great stories that she can tell her grandchildren about when she's old and frail. She wants more in life... and it seems, so does Jonathan. She squints at him and asks, "Where would you go when you leave?"

Jonathan grins as he takes on a faraway look. "New York."

"New York?" Nancy asks curiously. "Why New York?"

"I've wanted to go to NYU since I was six." He looks down at his camera and shows her. "To become a better photographer... then when I graduate, I want to travel the world, take pictures, make memories, capture the essence of who we are as human beings."

Nancy looks down as she thinks about Jonathan's dreams. She looks at him again and asks, "You really know who you are, don't you?"

He shrugs, "I've known who I was since the first moment I took my first picture."

Nancy smiles. She likes that. She admires him for his ability to know what he wants. Their entire school thought he was a nobody with no life, but she's just now finding out that he's probably the only person who really knows what he's doing. He's the only person who knows what life he wants for himself, and what he's going to do as soon as he graduates high school. People like him are so rare and so terribly hard to find. Perhaps they don't want to be found. Perhaps the key to living a happy life, is not in making sure everyone knows about it,

but in knowing that you're happy doing the things you love without caring about the opinions of others.

She'd been so focused on her reputation at school, that she never stopped to think that maybe her reputation isn't going to shape her future and her happiness. Maybe it's time that she finally changed that.

"What about *you*?" Jonathan asks curiously.

"What *about* me?"

Jonathan shrugs, "What do you do for fun?"

Nancy looks out onto the dance floor and bites her lip. She used to write a lot. It started as a journal, but quickly turned into something she really loved. She used to write about everything and anything... but that slowly stopped when she started dating Steve. She just never had time anymore to do the things she really enjoyed. She looks up at Jonathan and smiles. "Writing."

This makes Jonathan smile widely. "That sounds real."

Nancy's eyebrows furrow at him. "What do you mean?"

Jonathan sighs and holds up his camera, giving her time to stop him before he takes her picture. "I'll show you later." He let's the camera hang from the strap around his neck and holds his hand out to her. "Dance?"

Nancy quirks a teasing eyebrow at him. "This is a middle school dance."

Jonathan nods, "I know... but we're not doing anything and no one is going to stop us." He shrugs, "Might as well make use of the time we have here and now." He waits.

Nancy looks from his hand to his face, then back to his hand. She slowly reaches out and places her hand in his, before he whisks her off onto the dance floor.

They instantly come together like magnets, her arms resting on his



shoulders and his arms around her waist. They sway to the music, staring into each other's eyes.

"Nancy?" Jonathan whispers softly.

She stares up at him through her lashes. "Yeah?"

"You don't have to pretend with me."

"What?" She asks confusedly.

Jonathan purses his lips. "I know you and Steve are only keeping up appearances."

Nancy's eyes widen for a fraction of a second. "How did you—".

"Know?" He finishes for her and grins. "The great thing about pictures, is that it doesn't change nor lie... capture the right moment, and it says a lot."

"Did you take a picture of Steve and I?"

"You were fighting that day." He explains. "I was just passing by the classroom you both were in, and I heard you."

Nancy glares at him. "That doesn't give you the right to take our picture! That was a private conversation between me and Steve!"

Jonathan sighs and gives her an exasperated look. "I know that, Nancy. And I wasn't thinking of taking your picture until I heard the pain in your voice."

"What?" This was confusing to Nancy. Did he like hearing her sound in pain? Is that why he wanted to capture that moment? Was he some sort of sick creep like everyone kept saying he was?

"Look," Jonathan begins softly. "I walked by the classroom, you and Steve were too angry at each other to notice me, and when I looked at you, I..."

"You what?" She's not sure she's ever wanted to hear the ending of someone's sentence this badly.

"I realized that that was the first time you looked... real."

Nancy furrows her eyebrows at him. "That's the second time you've said that... real. Like I'm not."

Jonathan shrugs, "You stopped being real when you gave up what you really enjoyed in order to fit in with other people."

This angers her more than anything because as much as she doesn't want to admit it, he's right. She's been pretending to be someone she's not for a long time, just so she could be accepted. She wanted to fit in and be the same as everyone else.

Jonathan sighs and pulls away from her. "You're much more than that, you know?"

"What does that mean?"

"It means you're good at pretending... but not good enough. I saw you, and I knew you were different. I took your picture, and I knew... you were real."

She shakes her head at him. "I'm still not quite sure what you mean by that."

He smiles and glances towards his booth where a gaggle of students have formed to have their picture taken. He turns back and nods at Nancy. "Meet me in the darkroom at school, tomorrow at 10am."

"What? Why?"

Jonathan holds up his camera and points it at her. "So I can show you what's real."

Nancy smiles, just as Jonathan takes her picture, then walks away towards his booth.

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She debates with herself on whether or not she should go to the darkroom at ten. For something so simple, she can't figure out why she's worrying over it. It's 9:55 when she finally decides to just go.

She arrives at the darkroom just after 10, and she finds it, unsurprisingly dark.

She's never been in there before, so she has no idea where the light switch would be, or if there's even a light since it's a darkroom. She blindly reaches for the wall to her left, thinking it should be like most houses with the switches located by the door. She finds nothing to her left, so she reaches towards her right. Something doesn't feel quite right when she finds soft fabric instead of a hard wall.

Suddenly, the fabric moves and she yelps as the lights come on. They weren't ordinary lights. The whole room was illuminated in a dim, red light. She looks whirled to her right to find Jonathan smiling apologetically at her.

"Jesus!" She exclaims in surprise.

"Sorry." He says softly.

She huffs as she lays a hand on her chest. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

He smiles even wider. "I didn't think you were actually going to come."

She quirks an eyebrow at him. "*You're* here."

He shrugs at her. "I'm *always* here."

She playfully rolls her eyes at him before looking around the room. Her jaw drops when she finds herself staring at about a hundred pictures of random people, strung up on strings. The people, some of which she recognizes, some of which she doesn't, didn't look to be aware of their photos being taken. There are even a few pictures of random things, a close up of a single leaf on a dying branch, a boot print in the mud, a splatter of paint on a wall, a squirrel running up a tree, a swing set, an empty water bottle on the ground, and many others. She takes it all in, silently observing the faces of the people in the pictures.

Most of them were pictures of popular kids in school. In the pictures, they didn't look quite like they usually do. Most of them looked to be

in deep thought. Some looked almost sad. But majority looked absolutely miserable. She turns, looking at Jonathan and voicing her honest opinion. "These are *really* good, Jonathan."

He smiles widely, proud of himself. "Here." He leads her towards the back of the room, where she finds 3 pictures hanging up, side by side from a line. "This is what I wanted to show you."

Nancy looks up at the pictures, and her breath catches in her throat. They were *her* pictures. In the first one, she's staring at something with a sad look on her face. She realizes that it's the picture Jonathan said he'd taken when she was fighting with Steve. She'd been sad when she told him that they should probably stop seeing each other. He was her first boyfriend.

"I had never seen you look sad before... usually you're smiling or you're expressionless." Jonathan comments. "So when I saw the expression on your face, I wanted to capture it as a reminder that you're capable of feeling pain like everyone else."

Nancy is confused by that, but she says nothing as she moves towards the next picture. One from last night at the Snow Ball. In the picture, she looked confused, but not really. More like she was unsure of something.

"Another emotion I hardly ever see on you." Jonathan smiles.

Nancy smiles back at him as she moves to stand in front of the final picture. The one he took last night before he walked away and left her on the dance floor. In this one, she's smiling, and not in the way she usually does. It wasn't one of her fake, polite smiles, or her infamous half smiles. This was her rare, genuine smile. The smile she only uses when she's doing something she loves, like writing.

Jonathan steps up behind her and says, "This..." He reaches up over her shoulder and takes the picture down before handing it to her as she turns to face him. "This is the real you, Nancy Wheeler."

Nancy looks down at the picture again and finds herself mimicking the smile in the picture. "The real me." She looks up at him.

Jonathan nods slowly. "The real you feels sad sometimes. The real you feels self conscious when you're with people you don't really know. The real you is happy and loves to write. The real you doesn't really like hanging out with people who aren't Barb. The real you gets sad sometimes. The real you, smiles genuinely, and lights up the world."

Nancy squints at him. "The world? That's a bit of an exaggeration, don't you think?"

Jonathan smiles and shrugs. "If not the whole world, then at least, *my* world."

She's gotta be honest, she's always thought Jonathan would be hard to make conversation with... but it's obvious now that she'd been mistaken. He certainly has a way with words. A way that makes her heart skip a beat. A way that makes her stomach flutter. A way that probably would've won the hearts of every girl in school, had he been more open to people. Her eyes trace over his face, taking note of the clearness of his skin, the perfection of his hair without any hair products, the warmth in his dark brown eyes, the beauty of his jawline. She's always thought he was handsome, but she certainly thinks more of him now than ever.

Because she'd spent so much time in the company of judgemental idiots (save for Steve, who is actually a pretty decent guy), she'd tried to accept that Jonathan was not good enough, and actually began to believe it herself.

But here and now, standing in front of him and his amazing art, she knows for a fact that he's *way* better than all of the fake people in her life. Jonathan Byers, is real. She shakes her head, mentally asking herself how she'd missed it all this time, as she leans up quickly onto her toes, and pulls him down towards her. Their lips meet in a searing kiss, and she swears her heart and stomach become acrobats on the spot. When they pull away for air, Jonathan grins widely at her.

She grins back and wraps her arms around his neck. "You're still a weirdo though, you know?" She asks jokingly.

Jonathan shrugs. "I know."

Nancy laughs and pulls him towards her again. "But weird or not, at least you're real." She murmurs against his lips as they kiss once again.

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A/N: Kind of pointless, but I wrote it, so I decided to just post it. Hope you guys like it! Let me know your thoughts!

-McDiggin'It